

Montgomery Students Protest Cuts to Magnets

By DANIEL DE VISE
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Larger and more boisterous groups have picketed Montgomery County government, but surely never one with a higher average SAT score.

Students from the science, mathematics and computer science magnet at Montgomery Blair High School in Silver Spring marched through downtown Rockville yesterday to defend their program, one of the top math-science operations in the nation, from the budgetary ax.

"Fund us, Weast," the crowd chanted, beckoning to Superintendent

Jerry D. Weast as about 100 protesters — a few were from schools other than Blair — approached the doors of the school system's headquarters shortly after 5 p.m. One student beat a bass drum. Another carried a sign that read, "We can do the math."

The sum involved is small: \$350,000, or the equivalent of 3.5 teaching positions, is being cut from Blair's magnet program, part of a \$10 million reduction in academic programs to balance an unavoidable increase in other costs — most notably, teacher salaries — in a tough budget



BY KATHERINE FREY — THE WASHINGTON POST

Montgomery County Council member Phil Andrews (D-Gaithersburg-Rockville) talks with student demonstrators outside the Council Office Building.

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Blair Magnet Students Fight Cuts to Program

year. But the demonstration, planned for weeks, generated considerable anxiety among leaders of the school system and county government. They do not want to be seen as setting off the decline of one of the most celebrated academic programs in the county.

School systems throughout the region are cutting programs to a degree not seen since the past decade, trimming costs to offset shrinking revenue from a moribund real estate market. The cuts, in turn, have prompted an unusually high pitch of protest.

Last week, Anne Arundel County officials accused the school system of orchestrating a campaign by parents, students and teachers to pressure the County Council to fully fund the school board's request for a \$100 million spending increase. Superintendent Kevin M. Maxwell has announced a reduction of 150 teaching positions for the next school year.

Earlier this year, Fairfax County parents successfully lobbied the School Board to continue paying for students to take Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate tests, costs Superintendent Jack D. Dale had proposed be passed on to many students to save money in a \$2.3 billion spending plan.

In Prince William County, where crowding has joined low teacher salaries as a constant complaint, parents and some School Board members are worried about preliminary cuts that could delay \$6 million worth of school renovations. And in Arlington County, parents are angry that construction planned at Wakefield High School, which has a high percentage of minority and economically disadvantaged students, might get postponed.

None of these disputes, however, has spilled into the streets.

The Blair magnet program, with 400 students and 18 teachers, has produced 25 finalists in the Intel Science Talent Search, the top pre-collegiate science contest — more than any other school in the nation. Blair has had a student among the winners of the USA Mathematical Olympiad, arguably the nation's premier math competition, in



Students, most from Montgomery Blair High School, protest cuts to highly gifted programs such as Blair's math magnet. They marched from the Montgomery Council Office Building to the Board of Education in Rockville.



each of the past three years, a feat matched only by the private Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire.

Founded in 1985, the magnet offers students a unique slate of advanced course work. Teachers write the courses and typically teach them until retirement or death. Much of the faculty is older than 60. When not teaching classes, teachers routinely meet with students to tutor them or aide them with independent research projects. Together, the 18 teachers oversee more than three dozen clubs, contests and after-school review sessions.

"There is an intellectual community here," said Ralph Bundy, who has taught in the magnet since its inception and, at 73, is among the oldest teachers in the county. "The members of that community are on call every

day, every minute. We never say no."

School system leaders say all they are doing is asking some teachers in the magnet, and in a few other programs for highly gifted secondary students at other schools, to teach one more class next year than this year.

Faculty members in the highly gifted magnets have been allotted three daily class periods to plan lessons, whereas other teachers get two. Halting the practice allows the school to offer the same number of classes with fewer teachers.

"None of the core courses have been cut. None of the popular electives have been cut. The bulwark of the program is still there," said Marty Creel, who oversees advanced academic programs in the school system.

Teachers, students and par-

ents within the Blair magnet say the cuts go far deeper and contend that the program has lost the support of the school system.

That perception, true or not, has prompted an unprecedented exodus. Two of the 18 teachers are retiring at the end of the school year. One is being involuntarily transferred. One is going on long-term leave. As many as four additional teachers have said they will transfer to other schools, although school system leaders say they have no evidence of this.

"They're really irreplaceable in that they're really the builders of the program," said Eric An, 17, a junior in the Blair magnet program.

School system officials say the eventual retirement of many Blair magnet teachers was inevitable and contend that the program can survive the introduction of a few newcomers.

Restoring the funds would be up to Weast, who proposed the cuts, or the school board, which approved them. Weast fortified his position last week, telling the board in a memo Friday that the cuts "are necessary in these austere times and will provide a solid foundation" for Blair and the other highly gifted magnet programs.

Staff writers Ian Shapira, Theresa Vargas and William Wan contributed to this report.